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Was South Korea's coup an attempt to restart the Korean War?

written by Ju-Hyun Park

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Opposition lawmakers are alleging the full scope of President Yoon's coup involved a months-long plot to trigger a “limited war” with North Korea



Yoon Suk Yeol

As South Korea's political crisis continues following President Yoon's failed attempt to declare martial law on December 3, new details are emerging in the country's legislature that suggest the full scope of Yoon's coup plot may have included plans to trigger a "limited war" with North Korea. Planning documents circulated among accomplices prior to the martial law order also demonstrate that Yoon and former Defense Minister Kim Yong-hyun looked to past martial law orders as precedents, including those issued prior to the Gwangju Massacre and the Jeju Massacre.

A possible timeline of how Yoon's coup plans interacted with escalations against North Korea has begun to emerge. Yoon's tenure in office has been characterized by unbridled aggression against Pyongyang, and a cozy military relationship with Washington and Tokyo that sent tensions soaring throughout Northeast Asia. It is now known that Yoon's coup plans began in July of 2023.

Upon coming into office in 2022, Yoon adopted a military policy towards North Korea known as the Kill Chain Doctrine, which advocates the use of preemptive strikes in the event of suspected attacks. Over the next two years, the rate and magnitude of joint military exercises with the US exploded; over 200 days of US-ROK war games were held in Korea in 2023, and in August of this year the two countries held their first joint nuclear tabletop exercise to rehearse plans for a nuclear strike on the peninsula. Consequently, inter-Korean relations have entered a historic nadir. In December 2023, North Korea took the unprecedented step of renouncing its policy of peaceful reunification.

From garbage war to “limited war”

Following this historic falling out between the two Korean governments, tensions spiked along the de facto land and sea borders of the divided peninsula. One of the more iconic signs of the deteriorating relationship have come in the form of garbage-laden balloons landing in South Korea from the north. For decades, Pyongyang tolerated US-funded NGOs in the south sending propaganda balloons across the DMZ. The fleets of garbage balloons that North Korea began to fly south this spring marked an end to this policy of patience.

In Seoul, the garbage balloons triggered a series of escalatory actions over the course of the summer. But in October, a [new line](#) was crossed. For the first time, North Korea reported a series of drone incursions into its territory—an allegation which South Korea’s Defense Ministry stated it could not confirm at the time. The incident led to Pyongyang detonating roads and bridges at the DMZ in an attempt to forestall potential invasion. Now, lawmakers are alleging the drone incursion may have been part of a months-long effort to trigger a military response from North Korea that would end in a “limited war.”

On Sunday, December 8, a military container used to house drones and launchers

caught fire. The next day, Democratic Party lawmaker Park Beom-gye announced he had received a tip from a military whistleblower alleging South Korea's armed forces were responsible for the drone incursion in October. On December 10, Kim Yong-dae, head of Drone Operations Command, submitted to questioning by parliament. He explained to lawmaker Kim Byung-joo that the fire was caused by a short circuit. However, when Kim Byung-joo inquired who ordered Drone Operations Command to send a drone to Pyongyang, Kim Yong-dae replied, "I cannot confirm that." Kim Yong-dae provided an identical answer to the lawmaker's follow-up question inquiring where the drones had been launched from. This prompted Kim Byung-Joo to accuse the military of setting the fire in order to destroy evidence of the drone incursion.

Suspicions of a plot to restart the Korean War have also been raised by lawmaker Lee Ki-heon, who reported on December 7 to the National Assembly that former Defense Minister Kim Yong-hyun attempted to order a direct strike on North Korea in order to "hit the origin of the garbage balloons" on November 28, just a week prior to the coup attempt on December 3. The Joint Chiefs of Staff have denied such an order was given, and reiterated the military's position that a strike in retaliation for the garbage balloons would only be authorized in the event that they caused injury or death.

Meanwhile, correctional officials reported that Defense Minister Kim, who was detained on Sunday, December 8 , attempted suicide in custody on the evening of December 10. He is in stable condition and remains in detention awaiting an expected indictment.

While lawmakers allege that Yoon's objective was to foment a "limited war," any attack by either Korean government on each other's de facto territory could rapidly escalate to a conflict involving the US, Russia, and China. All three of these countries have strategic military agreements on the peninsula.

A massacre in the making?

Other emerging details have demonstrated premeditated plans for repression in Yoon's coup. Lawmaker Choo Mi-ae has circulated [planning documents](#) from the martial law order that reference the infamous massacres that put down popular uprisings in Jeju and Gwangju.

From 1948 to 1949, South Korean soldiers, police, and paramilitaries slaughtered between 30,000 and 60,000 people in Jeju, and burned 70% of the island's villages as part of a scorched earth campaign conducted in response to a local armed insurgency against US occupation, and the impending 1948 election to establish the Republic of Korea, which was opposed by a majority of Koreans at the time. The [counterinsurgency war in Jeju](#) was prosecuted with the knowledge, support, and oversight of the US military.

In Gwangju, paratroopers acting under the orders of then-dictator Chun Doo Hwan killed up to 2,000 residents of the city, and engaged in a campaign of mass torture and rape. The incident occurred after Chun's declaration of martial law on May 17, 1980, prompting students and workers in the city to rebel against the military and establish a people's government that lasted for 9 days and resembled the Paris Commune. Once again, US support and foreknowledge was critical to enabling the massacre. President Jimmy Carter [directed the Pentagon](#) to assist Chun; South Korean paratroopers were permitted to be transferred from the DMZ, and an aircraft carrier and reconnaissance planes were deployed to the area.

Evidence of Yoon's plans for repression go beyond historical citation. Choo Mi-ae has further revealed plans to [secure hospitals](#) in the early phases of the martial law order, a sign that she claims indicates preparations for acts of mass violence. Several high-ranking military and police officials have attested to receiving personal orders from President Yoon to arrest key political figures, including opposition leader Lee Jae Myung. In an exclusive interview with [JTBC News](#), a Special Forces

Officer revealed that second-day plans for the martial law order included the deployment of South Korea's 7th and 13th Airborne Brigades to Seoul.

Allegations of a wider war plot

Further testimony at the National Assembly suggests a grander plan for war than the "limited war" theory outlined above.

Citing anonymous military sources, lawmaker Kim Byung-joo, a former four-star general, Kim told fellow lawmakers on December 10 that 20 members of the Special Forces' Headquarters Intelligence Detachment (HID) unit "were on standby at a location in Seoul" on the night of the martial law order. Kim claims the HID unit would have been mobilized to the National Assembly to arrest lawmakers, and questions whether they would have killed those who resisted, possibly while wearing fake North Korean uniforms. The HID unit is normally deployed to the DMZ and is tasked with operations in North Korea, including sabotage, kidnappings, and assassinations. Kim has also said that the HID unit's second-day orders were to cause disturbances at the National Election Commission, saying, "they were not a simple arrest team." Kim is calling for further investigation.

On December 13, influential independent journalist Kim Eo-jun appeared before the National Assembly with a bombshell claim. According to Kim, whose studio was targeted by the military in the early hours of the coup attempt, a source from "the embassy of an allied country" told him Yoon planned to assassinate Han Dong-Hoon, the leader of the president's ruling party, on the night of the martial law order.

Kim Eo-jun claimed Special Forces in North Korean uniform were to act as an "assassination squad" undertaking the following plot: "First, Han Dong-hoon is to be assassinated during transportation after his arrest. Second, attack the arrest unit escorting Cho Kuk, Yang Jeong-cheol and myself, pretending to rescue them. Third, North Korean military uniforms will be buried at a specific location. Fourth, after

some time, the uniforms will be discovered, and the incident will be attributed to North Korea."

Cho Kuk is an anti-Yoon politician who leads the minority Rebuilding Korea Party, and Yang Jeong-cheol is an influential former aide of former President Moon Jae-in.

Kim Eo-jun also said he received tips that Yoon planned to "kill American soldiers to induce the US to bomb North Korea," and that a biochemical terror attack had also been under consideration. Yoon would have thereby manufactured a situation from which he could emerge as the "reunification president" who successfully ended Korea's division by means of conquest.

Kim Eo-jun acknowledged the shocking nature of his claims, describing it as an "absurd story," and clarifying, "I have not confirmed all the facts." Journalist Kim further alleged that the First Lady, Kim Gun-hee, had also made contact with an OB (Old Boy, term for retired intelligence agent). Though he could not confirm the content of the call, journalist Kim raised the matter before the National Assembly out of consideration "that her husband is the Commander-in-Chief, so if there is even the slightest possibility these calls are related to disturbing public order, no risks should be taken." Journalist Kim called on the National Assembly to restrict the First Lady's communications.

The Democratic Party has vowed to investigate further, while the ruling People's Power Party floor leader Kwon Sung-dong dismissed the testimony as "fake news." The US Embassy in South Korea denied that it had provided information to Kim Eo-jun, clarifying that US intelligence would have been able to distinguish a false North Korean attack and notified the South Korean government. However, this statement has only raised further suspicions against the US Embassy in some circles due to its similarity to a pronouncement made by Congressman Brad Sherman in an interview with the South Korean outlet MBC News the day before.

Ju-Hyun Park is the engagement editor at *The Real News* and an organizer with *Nodutdol*.

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